

Is the existence of God logically consistent with the existence of evil?

This question, which has been asked many times, has come to be known as The Problem of Evil. The idea is that, given that God is as he (I'll use "he" for simplicity) is usually taken to be (omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent), why is there evil in the world?

It is thought that an all-good (omni-benevolent) God cannot by definition allow evil to exist, and since God is also all-knowing and all-powerful (omniscient and omnipotent, respectively) he would have the know-how and the means to vanquish evil, or simply wouldn't have allowed it to exist in the first place. The argument can be put very simply as follows (in my own words):

- 1-If God exists, he is all-kpg (all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good)
- 2-An all-kpg God wouldn't allow for the existence of evil
- 3-Evil exists
- C-So, there is no all-kpg God

This argument is perfectly valid, but its soundness is questionable. At first, I was inclined to accept this argument, but after further deliberation, there are problems with it. One of the premises can be rejected. Rejecting 3 is possible, saying that there is no evil, or that evil is not a positive thing (merely the absence of good), but this is irrelevant for the current question, since whether or not evil actually exists has no bearing on whether or not, if it did exist, the existence of God would be logically consistent with its own existence. Besides, most people agree evil exists. Even in God's Holy Bible, Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:3) questions God's justice, asking why the wicked prosper (Murray and Rea, 2008, 159). Rejecting premise 1 would take away from what it is God is supposed to be, and most Christians would not want to do this. So that leaves rejecting premise 2. I shall now consider two attempts at doing just that (the Greater Good argument, and the Free Will Defence).

One defence against the problem of evil is that evil is the means to an end, and the ends justify the means (Davies, 2004, 211-2). This suggests that God is using evil as a way of bringing into being a good which outweighs the evil. These evils may be necessary in order that, for example, we grow as people; Sober calls these 'soul-building' evils (2009, 111). However, I would suggest that an all-powerful God would be capable of creating good without needing evil to precede it. Moreover, Haldane (2003, 89) quotes St Paul (Romans 3:8) in saying that 'doing evil so that good may come of it is scandalous'. So, it would seem the author of much of the New Testament is not happy with the idea that an all-good God would use evil in order to obtain good later.

Stanley Kane suggests a problem with the greater good idea (Davies, 2004, 224). If we need evil in order to experience good, how can Heaven (our ultimate good reward for living a good life and accepting God) contain no evil as is often said? Moreover, what is the point in all the soul-building evils we endure, so as to build a good strong moral virtuous character, if we go to Heaven and have no chance to display that character we've worked so hard to develop?

It is often said that the greater good in question is free will. That humans have free will is itself a great good the existence of which permits the existence of evil (van

Inwagen, 2005, 198). But I wonder whether this one good thing warrants the amount of evil that has existed throughout history.

Plantinga quotes St Augustine (1955, book 2, 14-15) in saying that creating a world with free will (and as a consequence, evil) is acceptable because it is better to do the wrong thing than to do the right thing but only because you have no choice (1975, 26-7). But this is not true surely, because if you do the wrong thing, you will not receive your Heavenly reward upon death.

The usual way of looking at free will, however, is to say that it is our having free will which causes the evil, since free will entails that we are able to do good and bad actions, and so we sometimes do evil as a result (Davies, 2004, 212).

Firstly, there seems no reason to assume that having free will is a good thing, nor is it necessarily true that we have it at all, but for now I'll assume these are both true. So, we have the gift of being able to choose what we wish to do, a gift from God. But why give us this option if only to eject Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and cause all of their descendents to be born with original sin the first time they do something God would have preferred them not to do? Allowing evil to exist for everyone in history just because of something Adam and Eve did doesn't seem fair. But that aside, that it was possible for them to sin means evil already existed, at least as a concept, before humans did anything evil. So God is still responsible for creating a world wherein evil could exist.

Furthermore, if we assume that not accepting God damns us to Hell for eternity (which is the usual Christian assumption), then why give us free will to act independently?

Secondly, van Inwagen and Plantinga consider compatibilism (2005, 199; and 1975, 31-2 respectively). All that is necessary for us to have free will is that we are able to do what we *want* without being stopped. So, if God were to create us such that we only want to do good things, we would only do good things, but we'd still have free will. An objection to this idea might be that, if we are controlled, we aren't free in some real sense. But, even St Thomas Aquinas says we don't have to be the first cause of our actions to do them voluntarily (Davies, 2004, 222-3), so even if God, as the first cause of everything, made us only want to do good, we'd still do it voluntarily.

Another strategy is considered by Murray and Rea (2008, 173): that we can do wrong freely, but without consequence. For example, if I was to be overcome by malice and decided to punch Person X in the face, I would be satisfied with my action, but Person X would not feel the pain, so it's a win/win situation. But they also point out a problem with this idea: what if I felt bad and apologised? The apology would make no sense, especially in cases where the victim is unaware of the evil committed against them because they were completely unaffected by it. So perhaps this idea is not very plausible.

I would like to suggest something. God, who created the universe from scratch, could have used his infinite power to create a universe which we are incapable of even imagining, where there is not even a concept of evil. So, we'd always do good. Well, without evil, good would also not exist, but, is this so bad? Without the existence of good or evil, everything we do would be blissfully neutral.

A possible objection to this is that we do not *want* to live in a world with no bad things. This is evident from the idea of the Experience Machine, as discussed by Nozick (1974, 42-45). We would rather live in reality as it is than go into an experience machine wherein we would live a simulation in which everything was always good. So, perhaps it is human nature to want bad things to exist, to compare

with good things. But, this must be God's doing, for he created us. So, he could have created us not to want evil to exist, and created a world as I described, with no evil or good. And of course, we would still be totally free. Because, even in the world we do inhabit, we are free only in respect to things which are possible. I cannot jump up and fly in the sky unaided, I am not free to do so. If evil did not exist it wouldn't be possible, so I wouldn't be able to commit evil acts, but I'd still be free within the sphere of what exists.

Now that I've considered free will as one of the possible greater goods, I will now return to the greater good idea generally. Whatever the greater good happens to be, the idea behind the argument for it is that evil is permitted in order to obtain it. So, that accounts for evils which lead to a greater good. But, if there is just one evil, one single instance of evil, which is not needed for a greater good, then the original problem remains. Surely, not all evils we experience are necessary (Murray and Rea, 2008, 161; Davies, 2004, 219).

Unfortunately, regardless of what we might like to say, there is no way to firmly establish that the amount of evil in the world 'exceeds a soul-building minimum' (Sober, 2009, 113). Maybe the world we inhabit *does* have the minimum amount of evil required for some greater good. How would we know if it did? We wouldn't. There is no way to tell. But it seems to me that regardless of how much evil we have in the world, we'd always think it was too much. Whether we had 1 million turps (to borrow Plantinga's word) or only 1 turp of evil, it would seem to us that there was too much evil in the world.

So, there is no method by means of which we can ascertain whether or not the amount of evil in the world is too great.

So where does this leave the argument? The attempt to judge whether or not there was too much evil failed. But this isn't important since the original problem remains. An all-kpg God cannot allow evil to exist at all, and could have used his power to create some type of world wherein it was not a necessary antecedent of good that there be evil.

Finally, I will allow a concession to the theist and suppose that the existence of God is not impossible considering that of evil. But, surely, it is unlikely. Plantinga disagrees with this (1975, last chapter). I'll allow this concession also. But, even if it is not *unlikely*, it seems *less* likely that God exists given the existence and amount of evil in the world. We'd expect an omni-benevolent God to create a good world. That evil exists might not entail that God does not exist, but it at least makes it less likely (Davies, 2004, 219; Sober, 2009, 116). Surely, it is more likely that an all-good God would NOT allow evil to exist than that he would.

To conclude, I considered the so-called Problem of Evil. I weighed up the idea that free will, or some other greater good, necessitates evil. I decided that it would still be possible for God to create a world without evil. I considered the amount of evil, and concluded that, whilst it is not possible to measure this, or to say whether or not there is too much, it does make it at least less likely that God exists, if not unlikely or impossible.

I shall end with a quote from Hume (1779, part X, 88), drawing on Epicurus, which attempts to show that the existence of an all-kpg God is not logically consistent with the existence of evil, regardless of any reason God may have for allowing it. Perhaps Epicurus got it right more than 2000 years ago:

'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing?
Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?'

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